

The Overstory by Richard Powers

ROOTS

First there was nothing. Then there was everything.

Then, in a park above a western city after dusk, the air is raining messages.

A woman sits on the ground, leaning against a pine. Its bark presses hard against her back, as hard as life. Its needles scent the air and a force hums in the heart of the wood. Her ears tune down to the lowest frequencies. The tree is saying things, in words before words.

It says: Sun and water are questions endlessly worth answering.

It says: A good answer must be reinvented many times, from scratch.

It says: Every piece of earth needs a new way to grip it. There are more ways to branch than any cedar pencil will ever find. A thing can travel everywhere, just by holding still.

The woman does exactly that. Signals rain down around her like seeds.

Talk runs far afield tonight. The bends in the alders speak of long-ago disasters. Spikes of pale chinquapin flowers shake down their pollen; soon they will turn into spiny fruits. Poplars repeat the wind's gossip. Persimmons and walnuts set out their bribes and rowans their blood-red clusters. Ancient oaks wave prophecies of future weather. The several hundred kinds of hawthorn laugh at the single name they're forced to share. Laurels insist that even death is nothing to lose sleep over.

Something in the air's scent commands the woman: Close your eyes and think of willow. The weeping you see will be wrong. Picture an acacia thorn. Nothing in your thought will be sharp enough. What hovers right above you? What floats over your head right now—now?

Trees even farther away join in: All the ways you imagine us—bewitched mangroves up on stilts, a nutmeg's inverted spade, gnarled baja elephant trunks, the straight-up missile of a sal—are always amputations. Your kind never sees us whole. You miss the half of it, and more. There's always as much belowground as above.

That's the trouble with people, their root problem. Life runs alongside them, unseen. Right here, right next. Creating the soil. Cycling water. Trading in nutrients. Making weather. Building atmosphere. Feeding and curing and sheltering more kinds of creatures than people know how to count.

A chorus of living wood sings to the woman: If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we'd drown you in meaning.

The pine she leans against says: Listen. There's something you need to hear.

NICHOLAS HOEL



NOW IS THE TIME of chestnuts.

People are hurling stones at the giant trunks. The nuts fall all around them in a divine hail. It happens in countless places this Sunday, from Georgia to Maine. Up in Concord, Thoreau takes part. He feels he is casting rocks at a sentient being, with a duller sense than his own, yet still a blood relation. *Old trees are our parents, and our parents' parents, perchance. If you would learn the secrets of Nature, you must practice more humanity. . . .*

In Brooklyn, on Prospect Hill, the new arrival, Jørgen Hoel, laughs at the hard rain his throws bring down. Each time his stone hits, food shakes down by the shovelful. Men dash about like thieves, stuffing caps, sacks, and trouser cuffs with nuts freed from their enclosing burrs. Here it is, the fabled free banquet of America—yet one more windfall in a country that takes even its scraps right from God's table.

The Norwegian and his friends from the Brooklyn Navy Yard eat their bounty roasted over great bonfires in a clearing in the woods. The charred nuts are comforting beyond words: sweet and savory, rich as a honeyed potato, earthy and mysterious all at once. The burred husks prickle, but their *No* is more of a tease than any real barrier. The nuts *want* to slip free

TRUNK

A man sits at a desk in his cell in a medium-security prison. Trees have landed him here. Trees and too much love of them. He still can't say how wrong he was, or whether he'd choose to be so wrong again. The only text that can answer that question spreads, unreadable, under his hands.

His fingers trace the grain in the desk's wooden top. He's trying to see how these wild loops in the wood could ever have come from so simple a thing as rings. Some mystery in the angle of the cut, the place of the plane inside the nested cylinders. If his brain were a slightly different thing, the problem might be easy. If he himself grew differently, he might be able to see.

The grain under his fingers swings in uneven bands—thick light, thin dark. It shocks him to realize, after a lifetime of looking at wood: He's staring at the seasons, the year's pendulum, the burst of spring and the enfolding of fall, the beat of a two-four song recorded here, in a medium that the piece itself created. The grain wanders like ridges and ravines on a topo map. Pale rush forward, darker holding back. For a moment, the rings resolve from out of the angled cut. He can map them, project their histories into the wood's plane. And still, he's illiterate. Wide in the good years—sure—and narrow in the bad. But nothing more.

If he could read, if he could translate. . . . If he were only a slightly different creature, then he might learn all about how the sun shone and the rain fell and which way the wind blew against this trunk for how hard and long. He might decode the vast projects that the soil organized, the murderous freezes, the suffering and struggle, shortfalls and surpluses, the attacks repelled, the years of luxury, the storms outlived, the sum of all the threats and chances that came from every direction, in every season this tree ever lived.

His finger moves across the prison desk, trying to learn this alien script, transcribing it like a monk in a scriptorium. He traces the grain and thinks of all the things this antique, illegible almanac could say, all the things that the remembering wood might tell him, in this place where he is held, with no change of seasons and one fixed weather.

SHE'S DEAD for a minute and ten seconds. No pulse, no breath. Then Olivia's body, shucked from the lamp when the fuses blow, spills over the edge of the bed and hits the floor. The impact restarts her stopped heart.

Naked and comatose on the pine floorboards: that's how Olivia's new ex-husband finds her when he comes over in hope of a major blowout followed by make-up sex. He rushes her to the university hospital, where she revives. She's still buzzed. Her ribs are bruised, her hand burned, and her ankle lacerated. The physician's assistant wants a full account, which Olivia can't give.

The feckless, distraught ex-husband leaves her in doctors' hands. The doctors want to do some neurological assessment. They want a scan. But Olivia escapes when no one's looking. It's a university hospital, and everyone's busy. She strolls out through the lobby, the picture of health. Who's to stop her? She heads back to the boardinghouse and barricades herself in her room. Her housemates ascend to the attic to check on her, but she refuses to open the door. For two full days, she hides in the room. Each time anyone knocks, the voice inside calls out, "I'm fine!" Her housemates don't know who to call. No sounds come from behind the door except for muffled shuffling.

Olivia sleeps and keeps still, holds her bruised ribs, and tries to remember what happened. She was dead. In those seconds while she had no pulse, large, powerful, but desperate shapes beckoned to her. They showed her something, pleading with her. But the moment she came back to life, everything vanished.

She finds her song notebook wedged behind the desk. Colored jottings

Crown

A man in the boreal north lies on his back on the cold ground at dawn. His head extends from his one-man tent, facing upward. Five thin cylinders of white spruce register the breeze above him. Gravity is nothing. The evergreen tips sketch and scribble on the morning sky. He's never really thought about the many miles a tree travels, in smallest cursive increments, each hour of every day. Forever in motion, these stationary things.

The man with his head sticking out of the tent asks himself: What are those treetops like? They're like that cog-toothed drawing toy, spinning out surprise patterns from the simplest nested cycles. They're like the tip of a Ouija planchette, taking dictation from beyond. They are, in fact, like nothing but themselves. They are the crowns of five white spruces laden with cones, bending in the wind as they do every day of their existence. Likeness is the sole problem of men.

But the spruces pour out messages in media of their own invention. They speak through their needles, trunks, and roots. They record in their own bodies the history of every crisis they've lived through. The man in the tent lies bathed in signals hundreds of millions of years older than his crude senses. And still he can read them.

The five white spruces sign the blue air. They write: Light and water and a little crushed stone demand long answers.

Nearby lodgepoles and jack pines demur: Long answers need long time. And long time is exactly what's vanishing.

The black spruces down the drumlin put it bluntly: Warm is feeding on warm. The permafrost is belching. The cycle speeds up.

Farther south, broadleaves agree. Noisy aspens and remnant birches, forests of cottonwoods and poplars, take up the chorus: The world is turning into a new thing.

The man rolls over onto his back, face-to-face with the morning sky. The messages swarm him. Even here, homeless, he thinks: Nothing will be the same.

The spruces answer: Nothing has ever been the same.

We're all doomed, the man thinks.

We have always all been doomed.

But things are different this time.

Yes. You're here.

The man must rise and get to work, as the trees are already doing. His work is almost done. He'll strike camp tomorrow, or the day after. But this minute, this morning, he watches the spruces writing and thinks, I wouldn't need to be so very different for sun to seem to be about sun, for green to be about green, for joy and boredom and anguish and terror and death to all be themselves, beyond the need for any killing clarity, and then this—this, the growing rings of light and water and stone—would take up all of me, and be all the words I need.

PEOPLE TURN INTO OTHER THINGS. Twenty years later, when everything depends on remembering what happened, the facts of that night will have long since turned to heartwood. They put her body into the fire, facedown. Three of them will remember that. Nick will remember nothing. Bedrock in the minute she needed him, he turns worthless in the aftermath, seated on the ground by the flames, close enough to singe his eyebrows, as senseless as the burning corpse.

The others place her on the ready pyre, a thing as old as night. Her clothes burn, then her skin. The flowery words on her scapula—*A change is gonna come*—blacken and vaporize. Flames bear the flecks of her carbonized soul into the air. The corpse will be found, of course. Teeth with fillings, the nubs of unburned bone. Every clue will be discovered and read. They aren't getting rid of the corpse. They're sending it into forever.

Of leaving the scene, none will recall anything but forcing Nick into the van. Orange flickers above the evergreen woods, as wraithlike as the northern lights. Then dark snapshots for dozens of miles. They pass no vehicle for half an hour, and the occupants of that first car, a retired couple from Elmhurst, Illinois, with five hours more to drive before sleeping, won't even remember the white van speeding the other way by the time they see the fire.

The arsonists pass long stretches of silence punctuated by shouting. Adam and Nick threaten each other. Mimi drives in a soundproof bubble. Two hundred miles outside Portland, Douglas demands that they surrender. Something tells them not to. Olivia. That alone they'll all remember.

"No one saw anything," Adam tells the others, too many times.

*What was the wood, what the tree out of which heaven and earth
were fashioned?*

—RIG VEDA, 10.31.7

*And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut,
lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round
as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding,
and thought, "What may this be?" And it was answered generally
thus, "It is all that is made."*

—JULIAN OF NORWICH

SEEDS

*S*ay the planet is born at midnight and it runs for one day.
First there is nothing. Two hours are lost to lava and meteors. Life doesn't
show up until three or four a.m. Even then, it's just the barest self-copying bits
and pieces. From dawn to late morning—a million million years of branching—
nothing more exists than lean and simple cells.

Then there is everything. Something wild happens, not long after noon. One
kind of simple cell enslaves a couple of others. Nuclei get membranes. Cells evolve
organelles. What was once a solo campsite grows into a town.

The day is two-thirds done when animals and plants part ways. And still life
is only single cells. Dusk falls before compound life takes hold. Every large living
thing is a latecomer, showing up after dark. Nine p.m. brings jellyfish and worms.
Later that hour comes the breakout—backbones, cartilage, an explosion of body
forms. From one instant to the next, countless new stems and twigs in the spread-
ing crown burst open and run.

Plants make it up on land just before ten. Then insects, who instantly take to
the air. Moments later, tetrapods crawl up from the tidal muck, carrying around on
their skin and in their guts whole worlds of earlier creatures. By eleven, dinosaurs
have shot their bolt, leaving the mammals and birds in charge for an hour.

Somewhere in that last sixty minutes, high up in the phylogenetic canopy, life
grows aware. Creatures start to speculate. Animals start teaching their children
about the past and the future. Animals learn to hold rituals.

Anatomically modern man shows up four seconds before midnight. The first
cave paintings appear three seconds later. And in a thousandth of a click of the
second hand, life solves the mystery of DNA and starts to map the tree of life itself.

By midnight, most of the globe is converted to row crops for the care and feeding
of one species. And that's when the tree of life becomes something else again. That's
when the giant trunk starts to teeter.